

Venue: ISIS
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1130-1245 hr

Symposium 1E: Managing mass disasters

S1E-1. Identification and repatriation

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Identification is part of the death investigation. The method of identification can be divided into 2 processes, presumptive identification and positive identification. In Thailand it is the duty of the local police officer and local doctor to do the death investigation by law which includes the process of identification. Before Tsunami there is no specific law or any regulation that has the guideline of the work. When Tsunami struck the western coast of Thailand 2004, there were more than 5,000 bodies recovered within 6 provinces. Thai government have no national plan for critical incident management in a large scale disaster like this. The problems that happened on the early days were that the government organization can not evaluate the situation accurately and immediately. The police can not set up the policy, the procedure and the standard of the identification process. So different team set up there own method. The first step of identification should be started from the search and recovery at scene. In Tsunami, the rescue teams from all over the country arrived the scene to recover the deaths without system. Each teams carried the bodies to the temples where the local governor arranged for the temporary morgue. The members of the family who were found together in the same place might be brought to different temples. Under the limitation of staffs and equipments and with the overload of the work, we can document the bodies briefly. The labeled numbers were given with the reference of the place of morgue such as Takuapa or Bangmuang., etc. We took the photographs of the details of the properties and presumptive identification. The bodies of white Caucasians were separately kept in the refrigerator while waiting for the international DVI team. According to the Interpol, Royal Thai Police should promptly take charges as the guideline of international disaster victim identification. But they can recognized 11 days after the incidence. Thai Tsunami Victim Identification Unit was established two weeks after the arrival of the Australian DVI team. We transferred the work to this unit 40 days after the incidence. Right now there are about 500 unclaimed bodies remained for the DNA analysis. This unit is temporary closed down because of the complaint of corruption.

S1E-2. Mass grave investigations

Ong BB

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The objective of the investigations of a mass grave is dependent on the type of burials; whether it is for criminal forensic work (e.g. mass murderer), war-related crime or human right abuses or well-intention burial due to overwhelming bodies e.g. during a natural disaster. Regardless of the type of burials, the investigation of mass graves consists of intricate and complex processes dependent on well-trained personnel with different skills in forensic sciences and criminology (pathologist, anthropologist/archaeologist, odontologist, x-ray technicians, crime scene managers, photographer, mortuary technicians), support officers and proper planning and organisation for proper execution of the mission.

The main objectives of the mass grave investigations are

1. objective documentation and presentation of evidence, i.e. competent post-mortem examination and subsequent report
2. fulfil humanitarian needs especially in the identification of the deceased in a timely fashion

Preplanning and organisation of the investigation is essential and even more important in war crimes where investigations usually take place in a foreign environment. The site should be properly secure and adequate assistance should be sought to exhume the bodies. The internment should be under the supervision of an anthropologist or archaeologist and should be performed in a professional way taking care of the local social condition, proper recording of body including photography and identification number, proper removal of body to avoid further commingling or mixture of evidence and collection of evidence. After internment, the bodies should be brought to a proper working mortuary. The mortuary which should be organised earlier can be that of a temporary one or a pre-existing working mortuary modified for these cases. Care must be taken to ensure good logistical support which includes adequate water supply, good lighting and x-ray facilities. The autopsy process should be under the direction of a forensic pathologist whose main duties is to identify and record injuries on the body (and also on clothing), collect evidence in order to establish a cause of death, assess injuries to see if they are consistent with reported events, assess post-mortem interval and duration of internment. The anthropologist will assist by providing information relating to identity including odontology (assisted by an odontologist) including previous pre-mortem trauma or disease process) and separating skeletal remains in the event of commingling. Evidence should be collected in related to the alleged crime and for identification (samples for DNA).

Accurate documentation is essential during all the stages of investigation. Besides individual reports, a collective report should be written on the whole investigation. For the pathologist, it would be summarising the findings to see if it is consistent with reported events. A debriefing mission is recommended after the end of the investigation.

S1E-3. Global cooperation in mass disasters

Ranson D

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Global co-operation in mass disasters, especially in relation to Disaster Victim Identification (DVI), has proved to be difficult to implement in practice. The complexity of organising the forensic response to a mass disaster is much greater than most realise, and the level of preparation required is generally under-estimated. Without such preparation, offers of help can prove difficult to manage and may even complicate rather than help the resolution of the disaster. There are, however, important examples of international co-operation in such situations, the most recent being the response from many countries to the devastation wrought in Phuket, Thailand, by the Indian Ocean Tsunami on 26 December 2004. There was little such response in relation to DVI in Indonesia or Sri Lanka. Mass disasters are not just natural phenomena, and international co-operation in relation to identifying the many deceased following war or civil disturbance will also be reviewed and discussed.