



Disaster Mgmt Company Takes Charge In Phuket

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19 January 2005

PHUKET, Thailand (Dow Jones)--Outside the Yanyao temple in Phangnga, southern Thailand, where bodies of thousands of victims of last month's tsunami lie in a makeshift morgue, a sign reads: "We will bring everyone home."

It's a task which Kenyon International Emergency Services Inc., a U.S. disaster-management company brought in to help identify and repatriate the bodies, estimates will take well over a year. The Houston-based company is a subsidiary of New York Stock Exchange-listed funeral operator Service Corp. International (SCI).

"We had teams working in New York up to the second anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks and we're looking to spend in Thailand at least 12 to 18 months," Robert Jensen, Kenyon's president, told Dow Jones Newswires.

That timeframe is too long, according to Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had hoped to get remains of the victims returned home and the tourist areas back in business within a few months of the Dec. 26 disaster. Thaksin is known for setting unrealistically tight deadlines for major policy accomplishments.

The task of identifying and repatriating the bodies of the victims is hindered by the sheer scale of the disaster, but Thai authorities' eagerness to move quickly with the identification process may have complicated the process. Thailand has welcomed nearly every foreign forensic and disaster-victim identification team that offered to help.

The result has been a fragmented operation, with more than two dozen local and foreign forensics teams working in makeshift morgues at various sites, using different sets of standards and, of course, different languages. Local media have been rife with reports of turf wars.

"At some point there were about 30 different DVI (disaster victim identification) teams working here," Jensen said. "They're all pretty skilled people but having a lot of people doesn't necessarily help. What you need is a common set of very high standards."

Although the Thai government declined any international financial assistance for the disaster, Thaksin was quick to accept help with the identification effort as fast-decomposing bodies began piling up. Taking up an offer by the Australian government to pick up the tab, the Thai government brought in Kenyon within 48 hours of the disaster.

The company's job is to help match forensics data collected from the mortuary, such as dental information, fingerprints and DNA samples, with data provided by the families of the deceased. Once a positive match is established and local authorities issue a death certificate, Kenyon repatriates the bodies, including provision of the necessary

documentation and, if desired, arrangements for religious rites ahead of repatriation or funeral services back home.

The company says it is putting in pretty much everything it has. It has deployed in Phuket two out of its three mobile mortuary kits, from Sydney and London, and has more than 80 people working in southern Thailand, with plans to replace them on a rotation basis.

The company estimates it will spend "several million dollars" on the operation but wouldn't reveal its cost nor the size of its contract with the Australian government. Kenyon says it has more than 200 clients worldwide, mainly including airlines, for whom it handles crashes, as well as governments and corporations, which also hire it to train personnel in disaster management practices.

Even though Kenyon only has a permanent staff of 30 globally, it claims to have access to about 600 professionals worldwide, including forensics experts, embalmers, and DNA specialists.

Repatriation Center Still Empty

The tsunami killed some 5,300 people in Thailand alone, nearly half of whom were foreigners, and 3,500 are missing. Over 4,000 bodies remain unidentified. Jensen noted that despite hopes for quick closure, the process is time-consuming because mistakes can't be made.

"The worst thing you can do is send the wrong body or wrong personal effects to the wrong family," he said.

He noted that although the mortuary work will likely be completed in four to five weeks, the collection of ante-mortem data - information about the victims provided by the families - can take months. Typically, families of missing persons want to hold out hope and don't immediately provide dental records or DNA samples. Experts must also be vigilant about the data they chose to accept.

"You need at least two to three sets of eyes to check out every piece of information before putting it in the system," Jensen said.

So far Kenyon has organized the transfer of "only a handful of bodies" that were fairly easily identified in the early days following the disaster. A repatriation center the company set up near the Phuket airport, where identified bodies will be stored ahead of the transfer home, is still empty. It can hold the remains of up to 468 deceased in refrigerated container units, and Kenyon plans to expand it.

Meanwhile, confusion caused by the various identification teams led to a territorial battle between local forensic officials and the Thai police, which had authorized the setup of the DVI unit operated by the Australian Federal Police, Kenyon and Interpol, in a bid to centralize the operation.

Porntip Rojanasunan, deputy head of Thailand's Central Institute for Forensic Science, initially declined to allow bodies to be transported from Phangnga, where she's currently based, to a central site in Phuket, according to senior police officials and local media reports.

The standoff was resolved over the weekend after a meeting between police and government officials and Porntip, who agreed to share data on the 3,600 victims in Phangnga with the DVI unit in Phuket and allow the remains of foreign victims to be sent there after her team completes its work.

More than 160,000 people died in 11 countries around the Indian Ocean, from Indonesia, where a massive earthquake prompted the sea swells, to the east coast of Africa. But Kenyon has only been involved in Thailand so far.

"We have our work cut out for us here at the moment," said Phil Burfurd, an associate director in crisis communication services.

Jensen, a former U.S. military officer specializing in mortuary services, said the experience so far in Thailand has been quite different from the Sept. 11 case in the U.S., where no foreign experts were allowed to operate.

One thing they have in common: some bodies may never make it home. There are still remains of Sept. 11 victims that have yet to be identified.

Also appeared in the Asian Wall Street Journal.