

Naming the Dead

With hopes of finding survivors fading, relatives and scientists turn to the grim task of identifying victims

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Ria Ekkelkamp, a 53-year-old from the Netherlands, has a gap between her two front teeth. Norwegian toddler Ragnar Bang Ericsson has a small triangular birthmark on his lower back. Jacobo Hassan, a Mexican, has an I-shaped scar below his right knee. Japanese woman Chie Machida wears a pink-jeweled navel ring.

Such distinguishing details, some barely registered in happier times, leap out from the heartbreaking leaflets still fluttering from notice boards at morgues and hospitals near Thailand's tsunami-blasted resorts. There are photos of the missing, too: they are always smiling, it seems, snapped at weddings or children's birthday parties, or on the same idyllic beaches where disaster later struck. With hopes of finding survivors almost extinguished, the focus in Thailand has now switched to the grim task of identifying some 4,000 bodies. At Yan Yao temple, a makeshift morgue near the worst-hit resorts of Khao Lak, forensic experts in protective clothing and masks pace through wreaths of vapor from the dry ice used to preserve the decomposing corpses. They are part of a disaster-victim-identification (DVI) operation of unprecedented scale and complexity, involving more than 300 personnel from 30 countries. While time-consuming DNA tests are a crucial part of their work, unique marks—moles, scars, tattoos—can also prove decisive in reuniting victims with their grieving families.

Ten days after the tsunami, Thai volunteers were still unearthing corpses. By the time they reach the morgues, most bodies are too decomposed for their ethnicity to be visually determined. Eighteen hours a day, in two shifts, forensics experts work methodically through the morgues. Each corpse is numbered, and under Interpol-approved protocol, must be positively identified by dental records, fingerprints or DNA before being released to their families and, in non-Thai cases, repatriated. Forensic dentists remove teeth or parts of the jaw for lab tests, biopsies are taken for DNA testing, and fingerprints are lifted. Relatives supply samples of their own DNA in the form of blood and mouth swabs, and provide other "antemortem" information such as the victims' medical records. All this data is computer-crunched at the DVI Information Management Centre in Phuket, which tries to match victims to families. It's a daunting task even for seasoned experts such as the two American teams sent to Thailand from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), a Hawaii-based unit best known for its efforts to find and identify U.S. soldiers missing in action. Johnie Webb, a senior JPAC adviser now in Thailand, says: "We've never been involved in anything of this magnitude; 9/11 pales in comparison."

Speed is important, but accuracy imperative, stresses Karl Kent, an Australian Federal Police forensic pathologist and the senior foreigner in the Thai-led DVI operation. "The families must be entirely confident that the loved one, when returned, is in fact the person they lost," he says. The science of DVI is relatively straightforward, says Robert

Jensen, president of Houston-based disaster-management firm Kenyon, which has dispatched forensic scientists and mortuary technicians to sites of mass-fatality events worldwide, including New York City after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Those working on the bodies know that thousands of grieving relatives depend upon their efforts. "It isn't rocket science," says Jensen. "It's harder than rocket science, because it's blended with human emotion."

Many of those with missing friends or family members cannot bear to sit and wait while the scientists complete their work. Idan Geva is one of a group of young professionals who flew to Thailand from Israel to search for their friend Aya Shapira, 27, and her boyfriend, Uzi Sagi, 28. "They were staying somewhere in the Khao Lak area," says Geva. "We're searching the area for some kind of clue." He and his friends hired boats to explore the Phi Phi and Similan islands, on the off-chance that Shapiro and Sagi had gone on a diving trip. One of their team, a data expert, tried in vain to locate the computer from which the couple sent their last e-mail, at 9:43 p.m. on Christmas Day. They pored over lists of victims on a website so overtrafficked that it temporarily crashed. They examined hundreds of corpses, despite warnings from Thai police to stay away because of growing health concerns. "It wasn't a pretty sight," says Geva, "but it's something that needs to be done." They barely slept or ate for a week.

Then, finally, a clue. In a Khao Lak dive shop they found Shapiro's and Sagi's names on the waiting list for a diving trip, along with their resort name and room number. Geva's group—which met with members of ZAKA, an Israeli volunteer organization famous for scraping up the body parts of terrorism victims to give them proper Jewish burials—combed through the wrecked resort, but found nothing more. Their friends had perhaps been washed out to sea or lay in morgues where experts might eventually identify them from the dental records and DNA samples the group had brought from Israel. Dazed with grief and fatigue, the Israelis decided to head home last Thursday. "I wish I could have done more," says Geva, having already done so much.

Relatives will do everything they can to keep hope alive," says William Hoppe, an American psychologist volunteering in Phuket. "That's a normal human reaction."

Anders Ericsson, father of Ragnar—the Norwegian toddler with a birthmark on his back—rises daily at 5 a.m. to investigate tantalizing reports that a "little blond-haired boy" has been seen at this temple or that hospital. His search seems increasingly futile, but it is "incredibly valuable," says Trevor Fisher, a British nurse who has assisted Ericsson. "It's the only thing that brings comfort until the body is finally identified. All the relatives are walking away from this tragedy at their own pace. We can't take that away from them."

Though losses suffered by foreign tourists are profound, locals—who lost not just family, but homes and livelihoods—face even greater challenges. Prapa Sae Heng, 51, hails from the Thai fishing community of Nam Khem, where thousands perished. He was with his wife Amporn when the tsunami capsized their boat. Prapa held her safe until vicious currents dragged her off an hour later. Badly injured and wracked with guilt, he later hobbled around the temples to look for her body. Unlike foreign tourists, he has no photo of her to pin on notice boards: the disaster claimed his house and all its contents. "She's dead for sure," says Prapa from his temporary home on the concrete floor of a hospital parking lot. His 22-year-old son Thawit, however, continues to search. "I want to find my

mother's body so we can do a proper ceremony," he says. Closure might be a Western concept, but Asians ache for it just the same.

For many, it may never come. Some bodies will not be found, some will prove impossible to identify. But for Thai survivor Somsap Sukdi, the uncertainty is over. A few days after the tsunami, she came to Phuket's provincial hall to pin up pictures of her missing German husband, Markus Knoesel. Now, carrying their two-year-old son Jimmy in her arms, Somsap slowly walks the length of the notice board, removing the same leaflets with tears streaming down her face. Knoesel's body was positively identified the previous day. "He's not missing anymore," she says softly, a widow at 30 years old.

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